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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001639

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARONITE BISHOP ON PATRIARCHS' SEPARATE  
APPEALS TO AOUN AND HIZBALLAH

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
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SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) A hopeful yet concerned Boulos Matar -- the Maronite Bishop of Beirut -- reported on Patriarch Sfeir's efforts to prevent a presidential vacuum. Matar said the Patriarch is working with General Michel Aoun to move him from "king to kingmaker," and communicating with Hizballah to deliver the message that the Christian community finds it unacceptable for Hizballah to have veto power over the Christian presidency. Among presidential candidates, Matar thought Chales Rizk could attract a "half plus plus" majority. End Summary.

COMMITTEE NOT A SOLUTION, BUT A LINK

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¶2. (C) Maronite Bishop Boulos Matar began the October 18 meeting with the Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, stating, "I am very worried," delving into the background behind Maronite Patriarch Sfeir's separate meetings with Christian opposition and March 14 leaders at his residence in Bkirki that took place October 11 and 12. He explained that the Patriarch had wanted to bring all of the leaders together, but that opposition figures -- Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun and Marada leader Suleiman Franjieh -- refused, resulting in the separate meetings.

¶3. (C) Matar claimed that the meetings had some positive, albeit modest, outcomes; specifically, the participants agreed to meet again. In the Patriarch's meeting with nine members of March 14, the participants, including head of the Lebanese Forces party Samir Geagea, were united in their support for moving forward with a half plus one majority, should no consensus candidate emerge. Matar reported that it was the March 14 leaders who proposed a joint committee of pro-government and opposition Christians. While prospects for the actual implementation of the committee remain dubious, Matar commented that the committee would not be a solution, but a link toward one, and that the committee's work, if it meets, will be over within a week.

COURTING AOUN

¶4. (C) Building off the momentum from the Bkirki meetings, Matar suggested to us that the four main Christian leaders, former president Amine Gemayel, Aoun, Franjieh, and Geagea meet to determine who the next president should be. Having received individuals from Aoun's group the previous day, Matar mused that Aoun might be ready to step down from his personal presidential aspirations, adding that Hizballah is not giving anything to him these days. Matar believes Aoun's presidential ambitions should be managed and then appealed to by offering him the kingmaker role; Aoun needs something in return, he said. He advocates proposing directly to Aoun, "If you are not able to get the votes to be president, then who do you accept?" (Comment: This is not the first time we have heard the comment that the key to resolving the presidential impasse lies in changing Aoun, in this case by offering to make him a kingmaker. Aoun himself has rejected this role in recent media interviews. End Comment.)

#### REVIEWING THE COMPROMISE CANDIDATES

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¶5. (C) Matar then went through the list of potential candidates, dismissing Geagea and his war crime-filled background as problematic, passing over former MP Nassib Lahoud and Gemayel because they would not be able to get enough votes, and seemingly landing on octagenerian and prominent Maronite Michel Edde. "He is honest and he is in his eighties!", Matar said, suggesting that his age is an advantage (as he could die before the six-year term ends, thus being an acceptable candidate to other would-be presidential hopefuls). However, Matar deemed Sheikh Michel Khoury, also in his eighties, as too old.

¶6. (C) Minister of Justice Charles Rizk also appeared at the top of Matar's list because he may be able to garner

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70-75 parliamentary votes, or a "half plus plus" majority (and more than simply the March 14 MPs) that is now discussed in Lebanese political circles with more frequency. Matar said Lebanon needs a president who will talk to every group, even Syria, and who will preserve the UN Security Council resolutions. He thinks that, in the end, the Patriarch will suggest one or two names and suggested the Ambassador meet with the Patriarch next week.

#### FEAR OF A USG PUSH FOR HALF PLUS ONE

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¶7. (C) Matar turned somber at the prospect of a president elected with a half plus one majority, warning such an outcome will lead to bad things, illustrated by the preparations currently being made by both March 8 and March 14 (presumably referring to reports of arms build-up). Matar very seriously requested that the USG refrain from advocating for a half plus one majority, because this provided an excuse for Hizballah to push for war. The Ambassador assured him we are not pushing for such an outcome, but will accept a president elected in line with the constitution. Matar did express appreciation for Congress's October 17 resolution supporting Lebanon.

#### PUTTING HIZBALLAH IN ITS PLACE

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¶8. (C) Interestingly, Matar said that Bkirki is opening new channels to Hizballah. The point, he said, is to deliver a message to Hizballah that Hizballah's veto power is not acceptable to the Christian community and that Hizballah should act as part of Lebanon, not against it.

FELTMAN